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## Congressional Populism and the Crisis of the 1890S

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tisers at bay could simply be another element of the man's drive to control all aspects of the newspaper business.

Baldasty's study is hindered in other ways by this general lack of depth. While the primary sources are useful, there is almost no recognition that other events occurred from 1880 to 1910 or that other historians have written about them. For example, little attention is paid to the changing nature of American cities. While Baldasty claims that Scripps employed an early form of market segmentation, another valid interpretation might be that economic segregation within the city brought about these business demographics. Further, the heavy reliance on Scripps's autobiography and letters tends to romanticize and whitewash his actions. In all, Baldasty does an admirable job of describing the *effect* of Scripps's career without really getting at why E. W. Scripps was essential to these changes.

*Congressional Populism and the Crisis of the 1890s*, by Gene Clanton. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xii, 228 pages. Appendix, notes, bibliographical note, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY STANLEY B. PARSONS, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI, KANSAS CITY

Gene Clanton's study provides a new and welcome dimension to the understanding of the Populist political revolt of the late nineteenth century. The colorful and near revolutionary nature of the movement has generally been told from the state level, where the likes of "sockless" Jerry Simpson and Mary Elizabeth ("farmers should raise more hell and less corn") Lease provide colorful portraits of the farmer radicals. Unfortunately, most of the state studies are limited by a single state perspective on a multisectional movement that varied dramatically from state to state. The few investigations of the movement on the national level, such as John D. Hicks's classic, *Populist Revolt* (1931), or Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise* (1976), have been substantially limited by the previous research interests of their authors. Hicks, for example lived in and wrote about Nebraska, and a major criticism of his classic work is that he imposed his Nebraska model on the rest of the nation. Goodwyn's work can be similarly criticized. Because Clanton's work includes all of the Populists who sat in Congress, he has the unique opportunity to present a more complete picture of the diverse facets of the movement than most of his predecessors have been able to do. Analysis at the congressional level also can provide a better idea of what working legislators really thought and accomplished rather than what they said during the heat of a political campaign.

Clanton attacks his problem in a methodical and scholarly fashion. Certainly one of the most interesting concerns of anyone looking at the farmer radicals would be just how much they differed from their Democratic and Republican colleagues in Congress. The answer is: not much! Lawyers predominated, although there were fewer corporate lawyers among the Populists. Perhaps the most interesting revelation in this section was the level of education and sophistication of the Populist congressmen. "Sockless" Jerry Simpson, although largely self-educated, proved to be a brilliant orator and raconteur in House debates. Many had a college education, so William Allen White's characterization of Populists as uneducated farmer-hicks does not hold up.

The strength of Clanton's work lies in the chapters that deal with the Populists' ideas as presented in debates in the House and Senate. In their speeches they showed some diversity. James Kyle (SD) became a staunch defender of laissez-faire capitalism, while William V. Allen (NE) seemed like a socialist. But the real surprise was that the preponderance of Populist rhetoric, as reported by Clanton, pointed toward nationalization of major sectors of the economy as the solution to America's problems. Other Populist panaceas, such as the independent treasury system, received little attention compared to the attention given to nationalization. Populists also took a strong position against American imperialist adventures in the late nineteenth century. They idealistically supported the Spanish-American War because they associated Cuba's struggle for independence with our own revolution against England. But when faced with the establishment of an American empire in the Philippines, they became fierce defenders of self-determination. In both their nationalization schemes and their anti-imperialism, the great underlying concept was that of human equality. Indeed, Clanton sees the Populists as perhaps the last defenders of a humane democratic tradition against an emerging corporate order that emphasized "White racism, sexism (in the form of male supremacy), possessive individualism, hypercapitalism and imperialism" (170).

The book has two major problems. The first is methodological. Most congressional histories use some quantitative measures to ensure that evidence has not been skewed to fit the writer's biases. Roll call votes are real congressional commitments on specific issues while (it has been rumored) many congressional speeches are self-promoting. In other words, specific actions are better indications of ideas than long speeches that identify the speaker as standing firmly with "humanity." The methodological problem leads directly to an almost unquestioning acceptance of Populist analyses and programs. Thus Clanton concludes that if Americans had just followed Populist prescriptions

we would have somehow avoided the "inhumane preference" of the twentieth century (170). This is a rather stunning conclusion, since neither nationalization, socialism, nor government regulation has proven to produce the "humane" utopia the Populists expected. Technology played a major role in the demise of the small family farm and, with a modified form of capitalism, it has helped improve the lot of both the farmers and the other groups that Clanton believes were totally ignored at the end of the nineteenth century—women and African Americans. *Congressional Populism*, with its methodological overdependence on congressional rhetoric, presents a sympathetic view of congressional Populists, but it also illustrates how wrong the Populists were in many of their "humane" dreams.

*The American State Fair*, by Derek Nelson. Osceola, WI: MBI Publishing, 1999. 160 pp. Illustrations, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY CHRIS RASMUSSEN, UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

In their heyday, roughly between 1850 and 1950, state fairs were tremendously popular and significant institutions throughout most of the United States. Derek Nelson aptly describes his book as a "tribute to the American state fair" (7) during this century, when fairs simultaneously extolled the virtues of farm life and introduced many rural Americans to technologies, consumer goods, and entertainments that contributed greatly to the countryside's eclipse by an urban, industrial society. *The American State Fair* evocatively describes the extraordinary array of exhibits and entertainments that made fairs an annual microcosm of a state's attainments and the most eagerly anticipated event on many Americans' calendars. The book is organized thematically, and is divided into separate chapters on agricultural contests, midways, racing, carnival rides, freak shows, and other aspects of the fair. Nelson's sprightly prose is perfectly pitched to describe these annual carnivals, and the book's dozens of photographs, postcard views, and advertising posters are delightful and thought provoking. Fairs stimulate all five senses, but are especially a feast for the eyes, and Nelson has assembled a cornucopia of illustrations of midways, contests, and fairground architecture that capture the bustle and gaudiness of a fairground thronged with showpersons, exhibitors, salespersons, and patrons.

Nelson offers an important insight concerning fairs' role when he observes that fairs were always suspended between the past and the future—that is, fairs strove both to venerate the traditions of rural life and to introduce rural Americans to new ideas and technologies.

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